

Islam and War: Tradition versus Modernity

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ABSTRACT

Islamic thinking on war divides roughly into two main schools, classical and modern. The classical (or medieval) view commands offensive war to spread Islamic rule ultimately across the entire world. The modernist view, predominant since the nineteenth century, limits war to defensive aims only. This paper compares the views of two important Muslim scholars, the classical scholar Ibn Ishaq (d. 767) and the modernist scholar Mahmud Shaltut (d. 1963). This comparison reveals that the modernist project of rethinking the Islamic law of war is a promising though as-yet-unfinished project that can benefit from the insights of Western scholars applying the historical-critical method to the study of early Islamic sources.

Keywords: jihad, military ethics, warfare, Islamic Modernism, Muhammad.

Introduction

The past two centuries have witnessed a rather stunning shift in Islamic thinking on war. Classical Islam—the Islam of the eighth through tenth centuries CE—commanded offensive war to spread Islamic rule to non-Muslim lands. The classical Islamic view of war was codified by the

great Sunni Muslim schools of law, but its doctrines and assumptions can be found also in the earliest extant biography of Muhammad, that of Ibn Ishaq (d. 767). Indeed, Ibn Ishaq provides a revealing glimpse into the imperialistic mentality that drove the great Arab conquests following upon the death of Muhammad. In the modern period, Muslims have increasingly moved beyond the classical doctrine of *jihad* and embraced a view of war that limits it to defensive aims. A paradigm case of such modernist thinking on war is that of Mahmud Shaltut (1893–1963), a Sunni Egyptian scholar of Islamic law and history. Comparison and contrast of the classical and modern Islamic conceptions of war as expressed in the writings of these two scholars reveals the dynamism and diversity of Islam. It also provides valuable insights into the serious intellectual challenges facing contemporary Muslims as they recast the Islamic doctrine of war to fit the new reality of the modern world. These challenges, as we shall see, also represent opportunities for further development of Islamic thought.

Classical Islamic Law on War

We begin with a summary of the teaching of classical Islamic law on the subject of war. By “classical Islamic law” here is meant Islamic law as it crystallized in the work of the four great Sunni legal thinkers, Abu Hanifah (d. 768), Malik ibn Anas (d. 795), Muhammad al-Shafi‘i (d. 820), and Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855). Much of the current debate concerning Islam and war hinges, not on the content of this body of law, but rather on whether classical Islamic law is truly consistent with the Quran and the words and example of Muhammad [the sunnah], or whether Muhammad and the Quran intended a policy that was more peaceful and less threatening to non-Muslims. A key term here is *jihad*, a verbal noun deriving from the verb *jahada*, meaning “to endeavor, to strive, to struggle.” In classical Islamic law, the word *jihad* came to mean primarily armed struggle for Islam against unbelievers and apostates, though it can also mean any type of religious or moral struggle.¹ The Quran also uses other terms for armed struggle, such as *harb* (war) and *qital* (killing).

The classical Islamic law of war [*jihad*] can be summarized as follows.²

1. Rudolph Peters, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 8, s.v. “Jihad,” 88–91, and *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Marcus Wiener, 1996), 1; David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley: University California Press, 2005), 1–2.
2. The following summary is based on R. Peters, “Jihad,” and *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, 1–8; John Kelsay, “Religion, Morality, and the Governance of War: The Case of Classical Islam,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 18 (1990): 123–139 and *Islam*

The Islamic community [ummah], under the leadership of the caliph or imam (successor to Muhammad), has the collective duty³ to spread the rule of Islam all over the world, by peaceful means if possible, by warfare if necessary. The idea is that God's law [sharia] must govern the whole world. Since few communities would voluntarily submit to foreign domination, the duty to spread Islamic rule effectively amounts to a duty to wage war unceasingly against non-Muslims. Patricia Crone writes: "In classical law jihad is missionary warfare. It is directed against infidels, who need not be guilty of any act of hostility against Muslims (their very existence is a cause of war)...."⁴ Non-Muslims are to be invited either to convert to Islam or at least to accept Islamic rule, expressing their submission by paying a special tax called the poll tax [jizya]. Here there is some disagreement among different schools of Islamic law, some holding that only "people of the book," e.g., Jews and Christians, may pay the poll tax and practice their faith under Muslim rule while pagans must be forcibly converted, others arguing that non-Arab pagans may also pay the poll tax and continue in their non-Muslim faith (all schools agree that Arab pagans must be forcibly converted to Islam).⁵ Non-Muslim subjects of the Islamic state are called "protected peoples," [dhimmis] and they are subjected to a host of discriminatory laws intended to remind

and War (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993); Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri, *The Reliance of the Traveller: A Classic Manual of Islamic Sacred Law*, trans. Nuh Ha Mim Keller, rev. ed. (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 1994), 599–609; D. Cook, *Understanding Jihad*, 1–72; Yohanan Friedmann, "Islam is Superior...," *The Jerusalem Quarterly* 11 (1979): 36–42 and *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Patricia Crone, *God's Rule: Government and Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press), 358–385; Michael Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 3–66; Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians Under Islam*, trans. David Maisel et al. (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985), 43–110; Joseph Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 130–133; Majid Khadduri, *The Islamic Law of Nations: Shaybani's Siyar* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 1–22.

3. A collective or communal duty is one that God requires of the whole community, not of each member, such that if a sufficient number undertake it, the sin is lifted from all the group's members. See al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller*, 33. The notion that offensive jihad is a collective duty was first put forward by the great scholar al-Shafi: see Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History*, 107; see also al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller*, 600.
4. Crone, *God's Rule*, 364–365.
5. Crone, *God's Rule*, 370–371; al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller*, 603, 607.

them constantly of their humbled status and the superiority of Islam.⁶ Among other things, dhimmis are forbidden to proselytize, and Muslims who apostatize from Islam are to be executed. Dhimmis, however, are encouraged to convert to Islam, the one true faith that has decisively abrogated all earlier religions. The plan is clearly for Islam to grow and other religions to shrink and eventually disappear.⁷

Islamic law considers it offensive (though not strictly forbidden) for Muslims to wage expansionist jihad without the permission of the caliph, but if there is no caliph, no permission is required.⁸ All non-Muslims who refuse either to convert to Islam or accept dhimmi status are to be fought. In the course of that fighting, Muslims may not directly target women, children slaves, monks, or the handicapped, although collateral damage is acceptable if militarily necessary and, indeed, all moral restrictions can be set aside in cases of necessity.⁹ Conquered non-Muslims may be executed (if men), enslaved, ransomed, or released and allowed to live as dhimmis, entirely at the discretion of the Muslim commander, based on what is best for the Muslim side.¹⁰ Booty taken by Muslim soldiers becomes the collective property of the Muslim state, 20% going directly to that state and the remaining 80% shared out by the ruler to Muslim fighters.¹¹ Land conquered by Muslim armies becomes perpetual property of the Muslim ummah, and dhimmis (the former owners) must now pay rent or land tax [kharaj] on the land they culti-

6. Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi*, 43–77; Lewis, *Jews of Islam*, 3–66; al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller*, 607–609.

7. Crone, *God's Rule*, 372–373.

8. Al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller*, 602. James Turner Johnson notes that the authority to wage offensive war in Islam can rest on two distinct sources, the first “by line of succession through the recognized caliphs, according to the concept of legitimacy defined by the jurists,” the second, as in the case of the early Ottoman Turks, “by demonstrably possessing the Prophet’s *baraka*, according to the concept of legitimacy defined by the *ghazi* tradition,” James Turner Johnson, *The Holy War Idea In Western and Islamic Traditions* (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1997), 154–155; cf. 165–166. Radicals like Osama bin Laden arguably stand in this *ghazi* tradition.

9. Al-Misri asserts that “necessity excuses one from any rule whatever;” *Reliance of the Traveller*, 765; see also Schacht, *Introduction to Islamic Law*, 84, 200 and Bassam Tibi, “War and Peace in Islam,” in Terry Nardin ed., *The Ethics of War and Peace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 133.

10. Al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller*, 604.

11. Al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller*, 606.

vate, the tax proceeds being split according to the same 20/80% formula applied to other booty.¹²

Classical Islamic law divides the world into two zones, the “abode of Islam” [dar al-Islam] and the “abode of war” [dar al-harb], the latter referring to non-Muslim lands that have refused to accept Islamic rule. “Since the only legitimate sovereign is God, and the only legitimate form of rule is Islam, the various rulers and states within the Abode of War have no legitimacy...”¹³ A perpetual state of war exists between the two abodes, punctuated only by truces, which are permissible, not obligatory, for the Muslim side and which may not last for more than ten years.¹⁴ Such truces should only be accepted by the Muslim state if necessary to gather its strength. If non-Muslim invaders should penetrate the *dar al-Islam*, it becomes the individual duty¹⁵ of all Muslims in the area affected to fight back and to eject the infidel invaders by any means necessary; other Muslims have a duty to come to the aid of their fellow Muslims. God’s will is that Islamic territory should only expand, never contract.¹⁶

The classical Islamic law of war is closely tied to a principle of Quranic exegesis known as abrogation [naskh]. Classical Islamic exegetes traditionally have held that, whenever two verses in the Quran appear to contradict each other, the one that was revealed later in the life of Muhammad abrogates the other, even when the abrogated verse remains in the text of the Quran.¹⁷ According to the classical exegetes, while in Mecca (610–622), Muhammad was told by God not to fight the enemies of Islam but to endure patiently their persecution. Many verses in the Quran (the “Meccan verses”) convey these divine instructions.

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12. Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History*, 84–86.
 13. Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History*, 92; cf. Crone, *God’s Rule*, 359 and Khadduri, *Islamic Law of Nations*, 10–13.
 14. al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller*, 604–605.
 15. A personal or individual duty is an act required of each and every morally responsible person: al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller*, 32. On defensive jihad as a personal duty, see al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller*, 601.
 16. “[L]ands once Islamic are always properly part of the *dar al-islam* and Muslims are justified in retaking them as part of the individual duty of defense. Specific authorization by the supreme religious leader...is not needed for such jihad, for the authority to wage this war lies in the personal obligation of each and every Muslim to defend Islam against invaders.” Johnson, *The Holy War Idea*, 151.
 17. David Powers, “The Exegetical Genre *nasikh al-Quran wa mansukhuhu*,” in Andrew Rippin, ed., *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Quran* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 117–138.

Around the time of his migration [hijra] to Medina, however, in the year 622, Muhammad was given divine permission to fight against the pagan Meccans who had driven the Muslims from their homes (see Quran 22:39–41). After the conquest of Mecca and consolidation of his control over central Arabia, in the year 631, the ninth *Sura* of the Quran was allegedly revealed to Muhammad. Classical Islamic exegetes argue that key verses in *Sura* 9, especially verses 5, 29, and 73–74, command unrestricted offensive warfare against all non-Muslims—pagans, people of the book, and apostates—until all the world is brought under Islamic rule.¹⁸ In particular, Q 9:5 “can almost be considered the foundation stone for the Muslim conquests.”¹⁹ Classical exegetes argue that the verses of *Sura* 9 abrogate all of the earlier verses that had envisioned a more peaceful or conciliatory stance toward non-Muslims; for example, it became a commonplace of classical exegesis to assert that one particular verse, Q 2:256 (“There shall be no compulsion in religion”), has been abrogated by the verses of *Sura* 9, especially Q 9:5.²⁰ Pagans were now to

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- 18. These verses specify the three groups to be targeted in *jihad*: pagans or idolaters, people of the book, and apostates, respectively. “And when the sacred months are over slay the idolaters wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them, and lie in ambush everywhere for them. If they repent and take to prayer and render the alms levy, allow them to go their way” (9:5). “Fight against such of those to whom the Scriptures were given as believe in neither God nor the last Day, who do not forbid what God and His apostle have forbidden, and do not embrace the true faith, until they pay tribute out of hand and are utterly subdued” (9:29). “Prophet, make war on...the hypocrites and deal harshly with them... [T]hey uttered the word of unbelief and renounced Islam after embracing it” (9:73–74). Unless embedded in other texts, quotations from the Quran are taken from N. J. Dawood trans., *The Koran* (New York: Penguin, 1999).
 - 19. Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press/Perseus Books, 2007), 50.
 - 20. R. Peters, “Jihad,” 89 and *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, 2; Powers, “The Exegetical Genre”, 130–131; D. Cook, *Understanding Jihad*, 10; Friedmann, “Islam is Superior,” 38 and *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam*, 102; Jane Dammen McAuliffe, “Fakhr al-Din al-Razi on ayat al-jizyah and ayat al-sayf,” in Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibrani Bikhazi eds, *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990), 114; Crone, *God’s Rule*, 373; Reuven Firestone, *Jihad: The Origins of Holy War in Islam*, 48–50, 88 and “Disparity and Resolution in the Quranic Teachings on War: A Reevaluation of a Traditional Problem,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 56 (1997), 1–3, 14–15; Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History*, 24–26; Kennedy, *Great Arab Conquests*, 49–51; F.E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 308 n. 19; Uri Rubin, “Bara’a: A Study of Some Quranic

be compelled to embrace Islam and apostates were to be forced on pain of death to return to Islam; people of the book were not to be converted at sword-point, but they were to be pressured to accept Islam by the threat of war and its attendant risks of death, enslavement, expropriation, humiliation, and permanent loss of political power. “Summing up ...one can say that during the first several centuries of Islam the interpretation of jihad was unabashedly aggressive and expansive.”²¹

Modernist Islam on Warfare

Classical Islamic law is rather threatening to non-Muslims. It is also radically at odds with an international order of nation-states in which peace is the norm and war is justifiable only as a response to a grave threat that cannot be resolved peaceably. Consequently, many modern Muslims, and sympathetic non-Muslims as well, have attempted to re-think the Islamic law of war so as to restrict war to a purely defensive function. For example, the Indian Muslim Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) argues that war is obligatory for Muslims only in the case of “positive oppression or obstruction in the exercise of their faith...impairing the foundations of some of the pillars of Islam.”²² The contemporary American Muslim scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr points out that, for Twelver Shiites, non-defensive war is only permissible under the leadership of the rightful leader of the Muslim ummah, i.e. Muhammad or the imams descending from him, the last of whom disappeared in 873. Nasr also maintains that, among Sunnis, the influence of Mahmud Shaltut, to be discussed below, has decisively moved the mainstream toward the view that war is only justified for defensive purposes.²³ The contemporary Pakistani writer Ahmed Rashid asserts that, for Islam, armed struggle is only justified in resistance to an unjust ruler.²⁴ The contemporary Indian Muslim, A.G. Noorani, asserts that the true principle of Islam has always been that only those are to be fought against who attacked the Muslims first.²⁵ The contemporary American Muslim, Reza Aslan, insists that the doctrine of jihad includes “an outright prohibition of

Passages,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 5 (1984), 18–19; David Bukay, “Peace or Jihad? Abrogation in Islam,” *Middle East Quarterly*, 14 (2007): 3–11.

21. David Cook, *Understanding Jihad*, 30.
22. R. Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, 6.
23. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 262–263.
24. Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 2.
25. A.G. Noorani, *Islam and Jihad: Prejudice versus Reality* (London: Zed Books, 2002), 56.

all but strictly defensive wars;” the seemingly belligerent verses of Sura 9 of the Quran really are only directed against those who had already initiated hostilities with the Muslims in Muhammad’s lifetime.²⁶ Tariq Ramadan, the contemporary Swiss Muslim scholar, asserts that jihad in the sense of war means only “armed resistance in the face of armed aggression.”²⁷ Louay M. Safi asserts that “Jihad...is fought to repel aggression and lift the oppression of a brutal force, and is never directed at the other’s faith.”²⁸ All of the aforementioned authors lay great stress on Q 2:256, “There shall be no compulsion in religion,” and many of them suggest that it overrides any other verse that might seem to conflict with it.²⁹

Some non-Muslim writers sympathize with the modernist Islamic project of reinterpreting early Muslim sources so as to limit jihad to defensive ends. John Esposito, a contemporary American scholar of Islam, acknowledges that the verses of Sura 9 of the Quran “are quoted selectively to legitimate unconditional warfare against unbelievers and were used by jurists to justify great expansion,” but, like Shaltut, he argues that verses such as 9:5 and 9:29 really “call for peaceful relations unless there is interference with the freedom of Muslims.”³⁰ Another sympathetic non-Muslim, Karen Armstrong, writes that, according to the Quran, “Muslims must never open hostilities, for the only just war is a war of self-defense.”³¹ A contemporary European scholar of Islam, Rudolph Peters, writes: “A careful reading of the Quranic passages on jihad suggests that Muhammad regarded the command to fight the unbelievers not as absolute, but as conditional upon provocation from them...”³²

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- 26. Reza Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* (New York: Random House, 2005), 84–85.
 - 27. Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 98.
 - 28. Louay M. Safi, *Peace and the Limits of War: Transcending the Classical Conception of Jihad*, 2nd ed. (London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2003), vii.
 - 29. Noorani, *Islam and Jihad*, 56; Aslan, *No god but God*, 85; Nasr, *Heart of Islam*, 49, 262; R. Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, 62–70; Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet*, 116; Safi, *Peace and the Limits of War*, 24.
 - 30. John Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 34–35.
 - 31. Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 209.
 - 32. Peters, “Jihad,” 89.

Mahmud Shaltut's Argument

Mahmud Shaltut (1893–1963) spent most of his adult life as a highly respected and popular teacher and scholar of Islam at Egypt's al-Azhar University, "the oldest and most prestigious centre of Islamic learning, and...still regarded as the main centre of spiritual and religious leadership for Sunni Muslims."³³ In the last five years of his life, he held the post of "Shaykh al-Azhar," which Seyyed Hossein Nasr describes as "the most influential and significant religious position in the Sunni world."³⁴ Kate Zebiri writes: "Shaltut was a popular Shaykh al-Azhar,...and his name is still well-known to educated Muslims from all over the world;"³⁵ "the number of editions of his books that have been and continue to be published posthumously bear witness" to Shaltut's popularity and authority.³⁶ Rudolph Peters observes that Shaltut's "peaceful interpretation of the classical jihad doctrine...is representative of the views of the Islamic establishment also in our own days,"³⁷ a point made also by Seyyed Hossein Nasr.³⁸ Of Shaltut's approach to Quranic interpretation [tafsir], Zebiri notes: "There is no doubt that Shaltut's tafsir has been influential both among ordinary Muslims and among Islamic scholars. It received a wide distribution and is familiar to educated Muslims all over the Islamic world."³⁹ Several of Shaltut's students have gone on to become renowned Islamic scholars, e.g. Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Muhammad al-Madani.⁴⁰

We are justified in concluding, then, that Shaltut was a particularly important and influential Sunni Muslim voice in the twentieth century. We now examine his arguments for the modernist view of jihad in order

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33. Kate Zebiri, *Mahmud Shaltut and Islamic Modernism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 4; cf. Kate Zebiri, "Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut: Between Tradition and Modernity," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 2 (1991), 210.
 34. Nasr, *The Heart of Islam*, 262.
 35. Zebiri, "Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut," 212–213.
 36. Zebiri, *Mahmud Shaltut and Islamic Modernism*, 4. Zebiri stresses Shaltut's popularity: "By all accounts Shaltut was a very popular choice for the position of Shaykh al-Azhar" (13); Shaltut's "funeral procession included several high-ranking members of Government, and was attended by huge numbers of mourners" (15).
 37. R. Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, 59.
 38. Nasr, *The Heart of Islam*, 262.
 39. Zebiri, *Mahmud Shaltut and Islamic Modernism*, 169.
 40. Zebiri, "Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut," 213.

then to contrast his approach to that of Ibn Ishaq.

Shaltut begins by rejecting the traditional doctrine of abrogation, in which “verses are interpreted on the basis of certain extra-Koranic assumptions or principles.”⁴¹ Rather, his preferred method of interpretation “consists in collecting all the verses concerning a certain topic and analyzing them in their interrelation.”⁴² Shaltut then argues at some length that there can be no compulsion in religion, since belief must be a free response of the human mind to reason and evidence: any interpretation of the verses on fighting must make them consistent with this principle, as articulated in Q 2:256.⁴³ Shaltut has little difficulty establishing the defensive character of the first verses permitting Muslims to fight their enemies (Q 22:39–41), for these verses clearly focus on fighting as a response to persecution. The verses of Sura 9 are more of a challenge. Here Shaltut focuses on the verses that mention the breaking of agreements by non-Muslims, e.g. Q 9:12–13: “But if they break their oaths after their covenant and thrust at your religion, then fight the leaders of unbelief...”⁴⁴ The fighting commanded by Q 9:5, he suggests, is only in response to prior treaty-breaking by pagan Arabs. Regarding Q 9:29, the famous *ayat al-jizya* or poll-tax verse, Shaltut asserts that this verse commands fighting only against people of the book who “had broken their pledges and hindered and assailed the propagation of the Islamic mission [cf. Q 9:7–16]. These acts constituted for the Muslims reasons for fighting them.”⁴⁵ Shaltut also interprets Q 8:61–62 (“And if they incline to peace, do thou incline to it”) as enjoining permanent peace treaties with enemies who sincerely wish for peace with Muslims.⁴⁶ Finally, Shaltut maintains that Muhammad and his companions and successors, Abu Bakr and Umar, waged exclusively defensive wars against those who threatened the Muslims, especially the Persians and Byzantines.⁴⁷

41. R. Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, 60–61; cf. 80–81.

42. R. Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, 61. For a general treatment of Shaltut’s approach to interpreting the Quran, see Zebiri, *Mahmud Shaltut and Islamic Modernism*, 150–180.

43. R. Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, 62–70.

44. R. Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, 75–76.

45. R. Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, 76–77.

46. R. Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, 92.

47. R. Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, 94–100.

Ibn Ishaq on War

Ibn Ishaq's biography, written about 125 years after Muhammad's death, is the earliest extant biography of Muhammad.⁴⁸ Indeed, it is, in Francis Peters' words, "the classical and canonical biography of Muhammad."⁴⁹ Alfred Guillaume notes that it "has no serious rival" as a source of information on Muhammad; indeed, "no book known to the Arabs or to us can compare in comprehensiveness, arrangement, or systematic treatment."⁵⁰ Ibn Ishaq's work has been regarded with respect by Muslim readers for centuries; W. Montgomery Watt observes, "The esteem in which Ibn Ishaq is held is doubtless due to the fact that there is nothing in his *Sira* which could not be accepted by the community as a whole."⁵¹ There are, of course, other histories of Muhammad by classical Islamic scholars, but, as Francis Peters observes, "all the earliest surviving versions of Muhammad's life rely heavily on Ibn Ishaq's original *Sira*."⁵² Ibn Ishaq's work should not be read uncritically, for there are reasons to doubt its reliability (and we shall return to this important point). It is, however, an especially important source on the origins of Islam, a source with which modernists like Shaltut must somehow come to terms.

A close reading of Ibn Ishaq's biography of Muhammad reveals a very different interpretation of the Quran and the life of Muhammad from that of Shaltut. We can group the contrasting approaches under four headings: (1) The significance of Q 2:256, "There shall be no compulsion in religion;" (2) The doctrine of abrogation; (3) The interpretation of Sura 9 of the Quran; (4) the significance of the military campaigns Muhammad ordered against Byzantine Syria/Palestine in the last three years of his life.

Q 2:256: "There shall be no compulsion in religion"

In nearly seven hundred pages, Ibn Ishaq alludes to this verse only once, specifically, when quoting a letter from Muhammad to the Jews of Khaybar:

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- 48. Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History*, 37.
 - 49. F.E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*, 49.
 - 50. Alfred Guillaume trans., *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), xiv, xvii.
 - 51. W. Montgomery Watt, *Early Islam: Collected Articles* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 15.
 - 52. F.E. Peters, "The Quest of the Historical Muhammad," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 23 (1991), 304.

The apostle wrote to the Jews of Khaybar...God says to you, O scripture folk, and you will find it in your scripture "Muhammad is the apostle of God..." Do you find in what He has sent down to you that you should believe in Muhammad? If you do not find that in your scripture then there is no compulsion upon you. "The right path has become plainly distinguished from error" so I call you to God and His prophet.⁵³

The first thing to note is that Ibn Ishaq only alludes to the opening sentence of 2:256 without quoting it directly (he quotes the second sentence, "The right path has become plainly distinguished from error."). Moreover, Muhammad's point is addressed only to the Jews or, more broadly, the "scripture folk" (the recipients of a divine book, so presumably the point applies to Christians too). Never is such a point addressed to pagans or polytheists or atheists. Far from being the unconditional, overriding command that Shaltut makes it out to be, the exclusion of religious compulsion is phrased as the consequent of a conditional statement: "If you do not find that in your scripture then there is no compulsion upon you." Significantly, Ibn Ishaq quotes Muhammad as repeatedly stating that the condition is not in fact fulfilled: the Jews and Christians most certainly *do* find it in their scriptures that the coming of Muhammad is plainly foretold. Muhammad tells the Jews point-blank: "You know that I am a prophet who has been sent."⁵⁴ Muhammad and other speakers accuse the Jewish rabbis of "calling the truth a lie after they knew it"⁵⁵ and of contradicting what they *know* to be in God's book.⁵⁶

Furthermore, Muhammad's actions suggest that he was willing to practice religious compulsion. After the Muslim victory over the pagan Quraysh at Badr in 624, Ibn Ishaq tells us, "the apostle assembled the Jews in the market...when he came to Medina and called on them to accept Islam before God should treat them as He had treated Quraysh."⁵⁷ This appears to be a threat: "convert to Islam or we will crush you militarily." Moreover, Muhammad adopted the policy of never killing anyone who had pronounced the Islamic statement of faith [shahada], even war captives on the verge of being killed.⁵⁸ This, too, amounts to a form

53. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 256.

54. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 363.

55. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 248.

56. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 250, 254, 257, 269; the charge is aimed at Christians on 277.

57. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 260, 363.

58. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 376, 667.

of compulsion in religion, since vanquished foes faced a choice between converting or being killed. Thus, of the Jewish Banu al-Nadir, expelled by Muhammad from Medina in the fourth year of the hijra, the only ones allowed to keep their property and remain in Medina were two men who converted to Islam.⁵⁹ Of the 600–900 men of the vanquished Jewish tribe of the Banu Qurayza, the only ones to escape beheading at Muhammad's command were three who “became Muslims and saved their lives, their property, and their families.”⁶⁰ Likewise, after the Muslim victory at Hunayn, the conquered Hawazin had to convert to Islam in order to escape enslavement and regain their wives and children.⁶¹ Ibn Ishaq writes that, shortly after the hijra, among the Arabs of Medina were certain “hypocrites, clinging to the polytheism of their fathers denying the resurrection; yet when Islam appeared and their people flocked to it they were compelled to pretend to accept it to save their lives.”⁶² In numerous other passages, Ibn Ishaq frankly admits that fear of physical violence led many Arabs to convert to Islam.⁶³ The account of the conversion of Abu Sufyan, leader of the pagan Quraysh in Mecca, indicates that Muhammad had no scruples about forced conversion of pagans. Ibn Ishaq writes:

He [Muhammad] said: “Woe to you, Abu Sufyan, isn't it time that you recognize that I am God's apostle?” He answered, “As to that I still have some doubt.” I [Abbas, the narrator] said to him, “Submit and testify that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is the apostle of God before you lose your head,” so he did so.⁶⁴

Toward the end of Muhammad's life, in the ninth year of the hijra, when Arab tribes came to pledge their fealty to the victorious Muhammad, they met with speeches like the following from Muhammad's spokesmen (in this case Thabit b. Qays):

We are God's helpers and the assistants of His apostle, and will fight men until they believe in God; and he who believes in God and His apostle has protected his life and property from us; and he who disbelieves we will fight in God unceasingly and killing him will be a small matter

59. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 438.

60. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 94–95, 463.

61. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 592–593.

62. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 239.

63. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 369, 547, 597–598, 628, 629–630, 645, 676.

64. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 547.

to us.⁶⁵

Ibn Ishaq's account of the conversion of the Banu al-Harith is another straightforward example of religious compulsion:

Then the apostle sent Khalid b. al-Walid...in the year 10 [i.e. 631 CE] to the Banu al-Harith b. Ka'b in Najran, and ordered him to invite them to Islam three days before he attacked them. If they accepted then he was to accept it from them; [note omitted] and if they declined he was to fight them. So Khalid set out and came to them, and sent out riders in all directions inviting the people to Islam, saying, "if you accept Islam you will be safe," so the men accepted Islam as they were invited.⁶⁶

When the Banu al-Harith subsequently sent a delegation to Muhammad, he told them, "If Khalid had not written to me that you had accepted Islam...I would throw your heads beneath your feet."⁶⁷ Khalid's ominous statement, "if you accept Islam you will be safe," with its implied threat of violence, occurs again around this time in a letter sent by Muhammad to the Byzantine emperor Heraclius.⁶⁸

The siege and capitulation of al-Taif is yet another example of forced conversion to Islam at Muhammad's behest. Muhammad laid siege to the Thaqif tribe, who resided in the walled city of al-Taif, after the battle of Hunayn in 630. Ibn Ishaq reports that "Thaqif took counsel and said to one another, 'Don't you see that your herds are not safe; none of you can go out without being cut off.'" In danger of starvation, the Thaqif surrendered to Muhammad, who would accept nothing less than the destruction of their pagan shrines and full conversion to Islam.⁶⁹ It is worth stressing that Muhammad insisted, not merely that the Thaqif agree not to threaten the Muslims again, but that they convert to Islam.

Near the end of his biography of Muhammad, Ibn Ishaq quotes Abu Bakr as summing up the life of Muhammad by saying, "God sent Muhammad with this religion and he strove for it until men accepted it voluntarily or by force."⁷⁰ Ibn Ishaq also notes, "The last injunction the apostle gave was in his words 'Let not two religions be left in the Ara-

65. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 629.

66. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 645.

67. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 646.

68. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 655.

69. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 615–616.

70. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 668–669.

bian peninsula.”⁷¹ This meant that non-Muslims could only stay on their ancestral lands in Arabia (excluding Yemen) on the condition that they convert to Islam, yet another form of religious compulsion from which Muhammad did not shrink.

Ibn Ishaq does quote Muhammad’s clear instructions that Jews and Christians who have been conquered “are not to be turned” from their religion, though they must pay the poll tax of one full dinar “for every adult, male or female, free or slave.”⁷² For Ibn Ishaq, the principle of non-compulsion appears to mean only this type of tolerance; it does not preclude the other types of pressure and coercion listed above, nor does it preclude the significant financial pressure of the jizya itself.⁷³ Perhaps even more significant than what Ibn Ishaq says on this topic is what he does not say. Nowhere does he stress the importance of non-compulsion in religion as a central Muslim principle. If one did not know better, one could be forgiven for thinking that Shaltut and Ibn Ishaq are describing two different religious movements. Ibn Ishaq presents no evidence to support Shaltut’s description of Muhammad as “the prophet who was the least inclined to use compulsion”⁷⁴ and much evidence that contradicts this description.

The doctrine of abrogation

By insisting that the Quran contains no contradictions, and that abrogation is therefore an illegitimate and unnecessary exegetical technique, Shaltut rejects a principle of Quranic exegesis that played an important role for centuries in Islamic tradition. The Quran itself seems to sanction the principle of abrogation in Q 2:106, 16:101, and 22:52.⁷⁵ Imam Muhammad al-

71. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 689; cf. 523, 525.

72. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 643.

73. On the onerous nature of the jizya in Islamic history, see S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, vol II, *The Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 380–381, and “The Jews Under Islam, part I: 6th–16th Centuries,” in Elie Kedourie ed., *The Jewish World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 180–181.

74. R. Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, 67.

75. “If We [God] abrogate a verse or cause it to be forgotten, We will replace it by a better one or one similar” (2:106). “When We [God] change one verse for another (God knows best what He reveals), they say: ‘You [Muhammad] are an impostor.’ Indeed most of them have no knowledge” (16:101). “Never have We [God] sent a single prophet or apostle before you [Muhammad] with whose wishes Satan did not tamper. But God abrogates the interjections of Satan and confirms His own revelations” (22:52).

Shafi'i, one of the most important and authoritative scholars of Islamic law of all time, "the Imam of the World," is famous, among other reasons, as the first scholar to have formulated the principles of the science of abrogation.⁷⁶ Islamic tradition traces the practice of abrogation back even further, attributing to Ali ibn Abi Talib, cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, a statement to the effect that a knowledge of the abrogating and abrogated verses is necessary for competent Quranic exegesis.⁷⁷

Classical Islamic authorities recognize three types of abrogation: abrogation of both wording and ruling; abrogation of the wording but not of the ruling; and abrogation of the ruling but not of the wording, with the third being the most common variety.⁷⁸ What matters most for our purposes is that Ibn Ishaq mentions at least one example of each sort of abrogation. In discussing the "Satanic verses," Ibn Ishaq informs us that both the words of the verses and the principle they conveyed were struck from the Quran.⁷⁹ Ibn Ishaq mentions the second form of abrogation when he quotes Umar's statement on the verse ordering the stoning of adulterers: Umar insists that God had sent down such a verse and that the ruling that adulterers be stoned retains the force of divine revelation, even though the words have mysteriously disappeared from the Quran.⁸⁰ Finally, Ibn Ishaq also gives a clear example of the third form of abrogation in his discussion of Q 8:65-6, in which God first orders Muslim soldiers not to retreat unless the enemy outnumbers them more than ten to one (8:65), only to relent and allow retreat when the enemy outnumbers the Muslim forces by more than two to one (8:66).⁸¹ Indeed, the

76. al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller*, 1095–1096.

77. Powers, "The Exegetical Genre...", 123–124.

78. Powers, "The Exegetical Genre...", 125.

79. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 165–166. The "Satanic verses" were verses permitting Muslims to pray for the intercession of certain pagan Arab deities. Muhammad said that Satan tricked him into believing these verses to come from God; when he realized his mistake, the verses were struck from the Quran; see Rodinson, *Muhammad*, trans. Anne Carter (New York: The New Press, 1971), 106–108. Armstrong (*Muhammad*, 111) states that the incident of the "Satanic verses" "is not mentioned by Ibn Ishaq in the earliest and most reliable account of Muhammad's life," but is recounted by the later historian Tabari. However, she appears not to be aware that Alfred Guillaume has reconstructed Ibn Ishaq's original text as far as possible by adding to Ibn Hisham's recension those passages of Ibn Ishaq quoted by other Muslim scholars, in this case Tabari; see Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, xxx–xxxiii.

80. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 684–5.

81. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 326.

Quran explicitly indicates the abrogation of 8:65 by 8:66, since the latter begins with the sentence, “God has now lightened your burden, for he knows that you are weak.” Ibn Ishaq is equally clear, telling the reader that “God cancelled the verse [8:65] with another saying [8:66].”⁸² While there may be arguments for Shaltut’s categorical rejection of abrogation, and while many contemporary Muslims also reject it, that rejection finds no support in the text of Ibn Ishaq.

Sura 9 of the Quran

Shaltut’s case for the allegedly defensive nature of the fighting called for in Sura 9 hinges on five verses that refer to promise-breaking by Arab polytheists as a cause for war: Q 9:4, 9:7, 9:8, 9:12, and 9:13.

Ibn Ishaq tells us that *Sura 9* (or at least its opening portion) was sent down to Muhammad in the ninth year of the hijra during the month of the hajj or annual pilgrimage to Mecca.⁸³ This would be roughly March or April of 631.⁸⁴ By this time, Muhammad had thoroughly subjugated all of central Arabia. Muhammad stayed in Medina that year rather than joining the Hajj, sending Abu Bakr instead to lead the pilgrimage in Mecca.⁸⁵ When the revelation of the opening verses of *Sura 9* came to him, Muhammad immediately sent Ali after Abu Bakr to promulgate the new revelation:

Then he summoned Ali and said: “Take this section...and proclaim it to the people on the day of sacrifice when they assemble at Mina. ... He who has an agreement with the apostle has it for his appointed time (only).” ... Ali arose and proclaimed what the apostle had ordered him to say, and he gave the men a period of four months from the date of the proclamation to return to their place of safety or their country; afterwards there was to be no treaty or compact except for one with whom the apostle had an agreement for a period, and he could have it for that period. ... Then the apostle gave orders to fight the polytheists who had broken the special agreement as well as those who had a general agreement after the four months which had been given them as

82. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 326.

83. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 617.

84. This is the date given by Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad*, 284. Uri Rubin discusses contradictory traditions that date the proclamation of the opening verses of *Sura 9* one year later in “The Great Pilgimage of Muhammad: Some Notes on Sura IX,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 27 (1982): 241–260. If true, this would tend only to strengthen the arguments being presented here.

85. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 617.

a fixed time, save that if any one of them showed hostility he should be killed for it.⁸⁶

In other words, agreements with polytheists are to be honored for their appointed term, or until four months have elapsed, and then all polytheists are to be fought (except those who had a special arrangement with Muhammad). Rodinson puts it succinctly: “On the expiry of the sacred truce of four months, all who had not been converted or made a special agreement with Muhammad would be dealt with as enemies.”⁸⁷ Reuven Firestone makes the point even more bluntly: “The tenor of the relationship between Muslims and idolaters after the grace period had passed is clear. It is a relationship defined by total war—a war defined by religion and fought for religion.”⁸⁸ F.E. Peters writes in a similar vein: “The pagans were to be granted a respite of four months; thereafter they would be killed wherever the Muslims encountered them.”⁸⁹ D.S. Margoliouth offers the same reading of Q 9:5: “the Arabs were given four months’ grace, after which the Prophet would raid them....”⁹⁰ Uri Rubin observes that the proclamation of these verses “...brings the idea of jihad against non-Muslims to its utmost extremity [note omitted]. Henceforth, non-Muslims should be fought just because of their disbelief, irrespective of time, territory or their actual attitude towards the Muslims.”⁹¹ Martin Lings concurs: “...the idolaters were given four months respite... but after that God and His Messenger would be free from any obligation towards them. War was declared on them, and they were to be slain or taken captive wherever they were found.”⁹² In the meantime, during the grace period, any sign of treaty-breaking by polytheists would be considered a cause for war, as Q 9:4 makes clear:

Proclaim a woeful punishment to the unbelievers, except to those idolaters who have honored their treaties with you in every detail and aided none against you. With these keep faith, until their treaties have

86. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 619.

87. Rodinson, *Muhammad*, 284.

88. Firestone, *Jihad*, 88–89.

89. F.E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*, 244.

90. D. S. Margoliouth, *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam* (New York and London: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1905), 430.

91. Rubin, “The Great Pilgrimage of Muhammad,” 249–250.

92. Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1983), 323.

run their term. (9:4)

Verse 9:5, the famous “sword verse” [ayat al-sayf], then expresses the new policy that will apply when the existing agreements and the four-month reprieve have run their course:

And when the sacred months are over slay the idolaters wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them, and lie in ambush everywhere for them. If they repent and take to prayer and render the alms levy, allow them to go their way. (9:5)

We can see now why Shaltut’s reading of the opening verses of *Sura 9* differs so markedly from that of Ibn Ishaq: Shaltut does not distinguish between the *defensive war* that is commanded as punishment for idolaters who break their agreements and the *offensive war* that is commanded after those agreements have expired. According to Ibn Ishaq, *Sura 9* is commanding both types of war, but Shaltut sees it as commanding only the first type.

From the standpoint of the sira, there are other reasons for challenging Shaltut’s interpretation of *Sura 9*. If these verses were ordering only defensive war against those who threaten the Muslims, then it makes no sense for Q 9:5 to command that the fighting cease only when the pagans “take to prayer and render the alms levy,” i.e. convert to Islam (only Muslims are obligated to pay the alms levy or zakat). The purpose of the fighting commanded by 9:5 is clearly to impose Islam on the pagans, not merely to stop their attacks, otherwise 9:5 would command fighting the idolaters merely until their attacks cease. Clearly, 9:5 is calling for the same sort of religious compulsion that Muhammad ordered against the people of al-Taif and the Banu al-Harith (discussed above). Moreover, according to Ibn Ishaq, God had given the Muslims permission to fight back against those who attacked them in the year 622.⁹³ If this is true, then for almost nine years, everyone in central Arabia had known that the Muslims were following the policy of retaliating for any aggression against them. If *Sura 9* merely reiterated a policy that had been in effect since 622, then there was no need to promulgate it in such an urgent and dramatic fashion. The special announcement by Ali at the hajj in 631 makes sense only if a radically new policy was being promulgated. Moreover, in his discussion of the year preceding the promulgation of *Sura 9* (April 630–April 631), Ibn Ishaq gives no indication whatever that Arab

93. See Q 22:39–41; Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 212–213.

pagans were gathering their forces or violating their agreements or posing any serious threat to the Muslims.⁹⁴ To the contrary, the conquest of Mecca and the victory at Hunayn in January–February of 630, and the subsequent surrender of al-Taif in early 631, meant that Muhammad had no serious rivals for power in central Arabia by March–April 631. His lavish distribution of spoils after the battle of Hunayn had made him many new allies,⁹⁵ and his power was such that he could now kill his enemies with impunity; for example, Ibn Ishaq tells us that the Quraysh poets who had not repented and converted to Islam had “fled in all directions” to escape Muhammad’s wrath by the year 630.⁹⁶ Uri Rubin points out that the proclamation of Sura 9

could have taken place only in a relatively late phase in Muhammad’s career, when most of his military projects in the Meccan vicinity had already been accomplished.... Once these military projects had been accomplished, the importance of Muhammad’s treaties with several pagan tribes in the Meccan vicinity was considerably reduced. Muhammad was no longer dependent on the cooperation of these allies, and thus the way was finally open to terminate all treaties with those allied tribes who, under the protection of their treaties, still refrained from becoming full scale Muslims.⁹⁷

In Ibn Ishaq’s account, so secure and powerful was Muhammad by the year 9 of the hijra (April 630–April 631) that this year is known as “the year of deputations (or embassies),”⁹⁸ for it was in this year that tribes from all over Arabia sent deputations to Muhammad to enter Islam and pledge their allegiance to God’s apostle. Ibn Ishaq writes:

When the apostle had gained possession of Mecca, and had finished with Tabuk, and Thaqif had surrendered and paid homage, deputations from the Arabs came to him from all directions [note omitted]. ... [W]hen... the Arabs knew that they could not fight the apostle or display enmity to him they entered into God’s religion “in batches” as God said, coming to him from all directions.⁹⁹

Ibn Ishaq tells us that the first delegation came from the Banu Tamim.

94. See Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 566–617.

95. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 592–597.

96. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 597.

97. Rubin, “*Bara’a: A Study of Some Quranic Passages*,” 20.

98. W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 79.

99. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 627–628.

The Banu Tamim invited Muhammad to explain himself to them, and Muhammad responded by instructing a Muslim orator, Thabit b. Qays, to answer them. Among other things, Thabit made the following points:

We are God's helpers and the assistants of the apostle, and will fight men until they believe in God; and he who believes in God and His apostle has protected his life and property from us; and he who disbelieves we will fight in God unceasingly and killing him will be a small matter to us.¹⁰⁰

The Banu Tamim promptly converted to Islam.¹⁰¹ Here we have an example of the aggressive new policy apparently expressed in Q 9:5, a policy which seemingly calls for offensive war against, and forced conversion of, pagan idolaters. If Ibn Ishaq is to be believed, it is therefore implausible to suppose that the opening verses of *Sura 9* are enjoining merely defensive warfare.

Next we discuss Shaltut's interpretation of Q 9:29, the poll-tax verse [ayat al-jizya]. This verse commands Muslims to

Fight against such of those to whom the Scriptures were given as believe in neither God nor the last Day, who do not forbid what God and His apostle have forbidden, and do not embrace the true faith, until they pay tribute out of hand and are utterly subdued. (9:29)

Verse 9:29 focuses on “those to whom the scriptures have been given,” i.e. Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians. Shaltut asserts that this verse applies to the same groups mentioned earlier in *Sura 9* (Q 9:7–16), namely, people who had threatened the Muslims.¹⁰² However, this not clear, since Q 9:1–28 seem to refer exclusively to pagans or idolaters. Moreover, Christians and Zoroastrians had never “conspired to banish the apostle” (Q 9:13), and the Jews of the Hijaz, who had engaged in some anti-Muslim conspiring, had been utterly subjugated by March 631. The “people of the book” posed no real threat to the Muslims in March–April 631, so it makes little sense for Muhammad to be exhorting his followers to defend themselves by attacking Jews, Christians, etc. In the context of Ibn Ishaq’s *sira*, a more plausible interpretation of 9:29 is that it is enjoining offensive warfare against people of the book based mainly on religious considerations, for the verses immediately following 9:29 focus

100. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 629.

101. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 631.

102. R. Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, 76–77.

on the alleged religious failings of Jews and Christians, not on any political threat that they might pose to the nascent Islamic state:

The Jews say Ezra is the son of God, while the Christians say the Messiah is the son of God. Such are their assertions, by which they imitate the infidels of old. God confound them! How perverse they are! (9:30)

If Ibn Ishaq is to be believed, then the verses of Sura 9 must be read as the culmination of an evolving series of divine revelations regarding warfare, and the direction of this evolution is toward a steadily broader understanding of the goals of war. This is something that Ibn Ishaq suggests well before his commentary on Sura 9. Thus, in his very first discussion of the divine permission to wage war, Ibn Ishaq seemingly distinguishes between three distinct phases of revelation regarding warfare:

The apostle had not been given permission to fight or allowed to shed blood before the second Aqaba [in July 622, the agreement with the Medinans that paved the way for the hijra]. He had simply been ordered to call men to God and to endure insult and to forgive the ignorant. ... When Quraysh became insolent towards God ... He [God] gave permission to His apostle to fight and to protect himself against those who wronged them and treated them badly.

The first verse which was sent down on this subject ... was: "Permission is given to those who fight because they have been wronged. God is well able to help them—those who have been driven out of their houses without right only because they said God is our Lord..." (Q 22:39–41). The meaning is: "I have allowed them to fight only because they have been unjustly treated..." Then God sent down to him: "Fight them so that there be no more seduction" (Q 2:193), i.e. until no believer is seduced from his religion. "And the religion is God's," i.e. Until God alone is worshipped.¹⁰³

The last phase mentioned here apparently moves beyond war for purely defensive ends to war for the religious aim of ensuring that "God alone is worshipped." This is consistent with the reading of *Sura 9* given above, according to which idolatry is to be stamped out and only Islam and "religions of the book" are to be allowed, with Muslims dominating other "people of the book" so as to ensure that the perquisites of power remain firmly in the hands of Muslims and no Muslim can be seduced from his religion.

We find a similar point in the revelations given to Muhammad after the Muslim victory at Badr in 624, specifically in Q 8:39, which Ibn Ishaq

103. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 212–213.

glosses as follows:

Then He [God] said, ‘Fight them so that there is no persecution, [note omitted] and religion, all of it, shall belong to God,’ i.e. so that no believer is persecuted from his religion, and monotheism may be pure, God having no partner and no rivals.¹⁰⁴

The term *fitna* in Q 2:193 and 8:39, translated as “seduction” in the first and “persecution” in the second, contains the ideas of painful trial, rebellion, and seduction; it also can mean idolatry or polytheism, the specific trial or temptation of associating partners with Allah.¹⁰⁵ These verses, then, revealed in the mid-620s, are commanding Muslims at a minimum to “fight the infidels and weaken them to such an extent that they would no longer be capable of promoting apostasy among the Muslims.”¹⁰⁶ They may also be enjoining direct attacks on idolaters *qua* idolaters. In any case, Ibn Ishaq indicates that the goals of warfare are moving beyond mere self-defense to the broader objective of upholding the political dominance of pure monotheism over all other forms of religion, especially idolatry or polytheism. According to Ibn Ishaq, then, the revelation of Sura 9 in 631 is thus merely the culmination of a trend that had begun several years before of broadening the goals of war beyond simple self-defense and towards the creation of a whole new political order based on the dominion of pure Islamic monotheism.¹⁰⁷

Muhammad’s Military Campaigns

An essential part of Shaltut’s argument is the contention that Muhammad himself only fought defensively, as a response to unprovoked aggression.¹⁰⁸ However, if Ibn Ishaq is to be believed, in the last years

104. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 324.

105. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 324 n. 3; Firestone, *Jihad*, 85–86; Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam*, 97–98.

106. Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam*, 97–98.

107. See also Tor Andrae’s gloss on Q 8:39 (which he numbers as 8:40):

The thought grew in him that the world must be compelled by force to obey Allah’s words and commandments, if preaching did not succeed: “Fight then against them till strife be at an end, and the religion shall be wholly God’s” (8, 40). Thus, even at this time, shortly after the battle of Bedr [Badr], the principle is formulated which for a season made the sword the principal missionary instrument of Islam.

Tor Andrae, *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith*, trans. Theophil Menzel (New York: Scribner, 1936), 206.

108. R. Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, 97.

of his life, Muhammad launched three separate military expeditions in the direction of Byzantine Syria/Palestine: the raid on Muta in 629, the raid on Tabuk in 630, and another raid to be led by Usama bin Zayd that was about to depart when Muhammad died in 632.¹⁰⁹ The problem with Shaltut's position is that Ibn Ishaq gives no evidence whatever that any of these expeditions were defensive in nature. Speaking of the raid on Muta, Maxime Rodinson observes that its motive "is somewhat obscure to us. Traditional accounts have woven together a medley of partial and contradictory reports in inextricable confusion."¹¹⁰ Shaltut's confident assertion that Muhammad's motive was self-defense seems unwarranted by the evidence.

The expedition against Tabuk seems to have had a non-defensive side to it. Muhammad's huge army intimidated several Jewish and Christian tribes around the Gulf of Aqaba into surrendering and agreeing to pay tribute,¹¹¹ even though there is no evidence whatever that these tribes posed any threat to the Muslims in distant Medina. W. Montgomery Watt notes that Heraclius had just defeated the Persians and triumphantly restored the Holy Rood to Jerusalem in March 630, and that Muhammad had doubtless heard of these developments, so that the expedition to Tabuk in late 630 "was a counterblast to what Heraclius had done in March." Watt concludes regarding the motivation behind Tabuk: "It is the precursor of the wars of conquest rather than the conclusion of the series of Muhammad's expeditions... All this goes to show that, when Muhammad set out in October 630 with his relatively enormous army, he was more or less aware that he was launching the Islamic state on a challenge to the Byzantine empire."¹¹² In short, the raid on Tabuk was quite possibly expansionist rather than defensive in nature. Hugh Kennedy concurs: "Muhammad's military campaigns were, in one sense, the beginning of the Muslim conquests. His example showed that armed force was going to be an acceptable and important element first in the defence of the new religion and then in its expansion."¹¹³ On the other

109. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 531–40 (Muta); 602–609 (Tabuk); 652, 678 (Usama's raid).

110. Rodinson, *Muhammad*, 255.

111. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 607–608.

112. W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 218–219.

113. Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests*, 48.

hand, Ibn Ishaq tells us nothing about either the tactical or strategic aims that Muhammad had in launching this raid, so the interpretations of Watt and Kennedy must be regarded as somewhat speculative.

Ibn Ishaq does mention one possible source of tension with the Byzantines, the crucifixion of Farwa b. Amr, a tribal leader in the border regions allied to the Byzantines and executed by them for converting to Islam.¹¹⁴ However, Ibn Ishaq does not clearly date this incident and so it is not clear that it was the *casus belli* of these expeditions. F.E. Peters notes that the later historians Waqidi and Ibn Sa'd allege that the expedition to Tabuk was aimed at a large Byzantine army that was about to march into the Hijaz—"a most unlikely enterprise," in Peters's judgment.¹¹⁵ The point I wish to stress here is that there is no evidence at all in Ibn Ishaq—the earlier and presumably more reliable source¹¹⁶—for the claim that the expedition to Tabuk was defensive in nature. On the other hand, we must freely acknowledge that Ibn Ishaq is utterly silent on Muhammad's objectives in launching these expeditions towards Palestine: the cautious scholar would, like Rodinson, remain agnostic on this matter.

A striking aspect of Ibn Ishaq's biography is that he repeatedly portrays Muhammad as enthusiastically anticipating the great conquests that would ensue after his death.¹¹⁷ Ibn Ishaq quotes an early Muslim source addressing his fellow believers as follows: "Conquer where you will, by God, you have not conquered and to the resurrection day you will not conquer a city whose keys God had not given beforehand to Muhammad."¹¹⁸ On the other hand, nowhere does Ibn Ishaq portray Muhammad as explicitly commanding his followers to conquer the world. When Ibn Ishaq does portray Muhammad as anticipating the conquest of the Byzantine and Persian empires, the modern reader must wonder if this is an instance of later chroniclers retrospectively attributing to Muhammad their own knowledge of subsequent Islamic history.

Finally, it is important to observe that the historical record also does

114. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 644.

115. F.E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*, 240. Peters, unlike Watt, asserts that the most probable reason for the expedition to Tabuk is that it was "a predatory 'fishing' expedition" aimed at booty; if true, however, this also shows that it was not defensive in nature.

116. For a critique of Waqidi's reliability as a source, see Michael Cook, *Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 63–64.

117. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 113, 191, 222, 243, 452, 454, 639, 658–659.

118. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 452.

not support Shaltut's contention that Muhammad's successors and companions (Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali) waged strictly defensive wars. In his study of the wars of *al-riddah* (apostasy), Elias Shoufani argues that the excuse of "apostasy" was used "to dissimulate the motives for aggressive Muslim military activity" against pagan Arabs,¹¹⁹ and that it was from the prophet himself that Abu Bakr and Umar inherited the policy of aggressive expansion.¹²⁰ In his recent history of the great Arab conquests, Hugh Kennedy points out that "the roots of the conquests lay in the policies and actions of Muhammad in his lifetime."¹²¹ Far from being a response to Byzantine or Persian aggression, Kennedy shows that the Arab conquests succeeded precisely because the Persians and Byzantines, weakened by years of warfare, plague, and religious strife, were in no condition to defend themselves, let alone mount an offensive against the Muslims, of whose existence they were barely aware. Indeed, one of the events that facilitated the Muslim conquest of Syria and Palestine was the Byzantines' decision to cease paying the subsidies that had kept certain Arab tribes vigilant against marauding Bedouin tribes along the Byzantine frontier there.¹²² The cessation of these subsidies is evidence that the Byzantines were either unaware of the gravity of the threat that the nascent Muslim community posed to them, or were aware of it but could not afford to defend themselves against it.

Concluding Reflections

So far we have seen that Ibn Ishaq provides much evidence in favor of the classical Islamic view of war and very little to support the modernist view of jihad as having a purely defensive aim. This may strike the reader as unsurprising, since Ibn Ishaq himself lived when classical Islam was the only form of Islam. If "classical Islam" is defined as the Islam that coalesced in the late eighth and early ninth centuries, then one should hardly be surprised that a book written by a Muslim scholar in the mid-eighth century is suffused with the ethos of classical Islam. So what?

The problem for a devout Muslim like Shaltut is that he cannot simply say, "So what?" The classical sources are the only ones we have on

119. Elias Shoufani, *al-Riddah and the Muslim Conquest of Arabia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 111.

120. Shoufani, *al-Riddah and the Muslim Conquest of Arabia*, 152, 163.

121. Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests*, 2; cf. 71.

122. F.E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Rise of Islam*, 231–232.

Muhammad, and the sunnah—the example and teaching of Muhammad—is second only to the Quran as the foundation of Islamic law and piety. The Quran itself contains dozens of verses commanding Muslims to obey and imitate Muhammad (e.g. Q 3:32, 3:132, 4:13, 4:59, 4:69, 5:92, 8:1, 8:20, 8:46, 9:71, 24:47, 24:51, 24:52, 24:54, 24:56, 33:33, 33:36, 47:33, 49:14, 58:13, 64:12, 68:4). Obedience to Muhammad is thus a duty under sharia.¹²³ Annemarie Schimmel observes, “The obedience due to the Prophet seems to have played an important, perhaps the central role in the development of Islamic piety.”¹²⁴ The duty to obey and emulate Muhammad is based on another piece of Islamic doctrine, namely, that Muhammad enjoyed divine immunity from sin and error (*isma*).¹²⁵ However, all of the materials on Muhammad’s life and teaching (the *sira* and *hadith*) are the work of classical Islamic scholars. To reject the work of such scholars is, or so one might fear, to reject one of the very foundation stones of Islamic law and piety and to render impossible the religious duty to obey and emulate Muhammad. Yet, as we have seen, to accept such sources uncritically would make it very difficult to reject the classical conception of jihad.

Modernists like Shaltut do, therefore, face a challenge: they must somehow rethink the duty to obey and imitate Muhammad. For instance, if they wish to take the prohibition of religious compulsion as a moral absolute, then how do they reconcile this with Muhammad’s apparent willingness to condone such compulsion? Islamic modernists must also perhaps begin to rethink the way in which Muslim scholars have traditionally used their own sources. Many (non-Muslim) Western scholars have argued that both the *sira* and the *hadith* are often unreliable because they contain evidence of having been forged by later scholars to score points in debates about Islamic law.¹²⁶ Other scholars also question the reliability of the oral transmission of stories about Muhammad on which the much later written accounts were based.¹²⁷ Furthermore, as we have noted, the modern-day historian also must wonder if Ibn Ishaq’s casting of Muhammad as a proto-Islamic-imperialist is not an anachro-

123. al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller*, 700.

124. Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 25.

125. W. Madelung, “*Isma*,” *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 4, s.v., 182–184.

126. See e.g. F.E. Peters, “The Quest of the Historical Muhammad,” 301–303.

127. See e.g. Michael Cook, *Muhammad*, 61–76.

nistic interpolation by classical Islamic scholars bent on justifying an imperial order which they took for granted in the eighth and ninth centuries. Modern critical scholarship might open an opportunity for Muslim scholars as they rethink the meaning of the sunnah: A Muhammad about whom we know less than we once thought we did might be a Muhammad who offers less support for the more belligerent forms of political Islam and greater support for Shaltut's more pacific approach.

Modern Western scholars of Islam also express great skepticism about the possibility of dating specific Quranic verses to their "occasions of revelation" so as to determine which abrogate which. As F.E. Peters remarks, "the suspicion is strong that medieval Muslim scholars were re-creating the 'occasion' backward out of the Quranic verses themselves."¹²⁸ Reuven Firestone observes that "the early exegetes who collectively developed this theory [of abrogation] disagreed greatly over the occasions of revelation, their dating, and which verses abrogated which."¹²⁹ Firestone suggests that the contradictions between the more and less belligerent verses in the Quran may "articulate the views of different factions existing simultaneously within the early Muslim community of Muhammad's day..."¹³⁰ Firestone's reading of the Quran does not at first seem to offer much support for the modernist interpretation of jihad, for, Firestone argues, the most belligerent verses represent the victorious faction, as they reflect the viewpoint of Muhammad himself, who endorsed a "total declaration of war against all groups, whether kin or not, who did not accept the truth or hegemony of Islam."¹³¹ On Firestone's reading, the Quran preserves the viewpoint of a group of dissenting Muslims who were reluctant to fight against their own unbelieving kin: "The dissenters depicted in the Quran represent the classic historical losers, who are portrayed by surviving texts (texts written or edited by the winning factions) as opaquely evil... The problem was certainly great enough to draw the powerful and repeated condemnation of God."¹³²

Nonetheless, if Firestone and Peters are correct, abrogation really cannot work as a principle of Quranic exegesis, and this cuts in favor of Shaltut's own approach to the Quran. It also undermines Ibn Ishaq's

128. F.E. Peters, "The Quest of the Historical Muhammad," 301.

129. Firestone, *Jihad*, 50.

130. Firestone, *Jihad*, 64–65.

131. Firestone, *Jihad*, 134.

132. Firestone, *Jihad*, 78–79.

attempts to link the verses of the Quran regarding war to many specific events in Muhammad's life. It would seem that modern readers of the Quran must be quite agnostic about the "occasions of revelation" for most verses in a way that Ibn Ishaq was not, and this does tend to undercut the exegesis that underlies the classical conception of jihad. Moreover, the historical-critical approach to any scripture, including the Quran, unavoidably highlights the historically contingent influences in and on the text and its composition. If the editing and canonization of the Quran occurred after Muhammad's death, as seems most likely, then there may well be ways of distinguishing between the timeless religious themes of the text and political dimensions that may not apply in the twenty-first century as they did in the seventh. Indeed, as Michael Cook observes, the early Islamic state clearly played a central role in assembling the final and canonical edition of the Quran.¹³³ If political leaders played the decisive role in defining the text of the Quran, then perhaps political considerations (for instance, the justification of empire and conquest) played some role in the process. This creates an opportunity for modern Muslim exegetes to disentangle the more political and historically contingent verses from those that articulate what may be construed as the eternal religious values of Islam. (This would admittedly require reconsideration of the Islamic doctrine of the Quran as uncreated.)

We may conclude that the modernist reinterpretation of jihad is an ongoing and as-yet incomplete project and that the historical-critical approach of Western scholars to the earliest sources of Islam may provide helpful resources for modernist Muslims as they seek to bring this important project to completion. On the other hand, our study of Ibn Ishaq supports another conclusion as well, namely, that the classical doctrine of jihad has deep roots in Islamic history, reaching back into the earliest extant biography of Muhammad. In a bracing recent monograph, Aaron Hughes reminds us of the dangers of ignoring the messiness, diversity, and conflict that mark the history of any great religion, Islam included.¹³⁴ Many Western scholars of Islam since September 11, 2001 have been too quick to answer anti-Muslim bigotry by insisting that Islam is an essentially peaceful, non-threatening religion. The problem, as Hughes points out, lies in the word "essentially." Any great

133. Michael Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 126.

134. Aaron W. Hughes, *Situating Islam: The Past and Future of an Academic Discipline* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2007).

world religion is contested ground, the focus of struggles between its adherents over precisely what its essence is. Objectivity requires scholars to admit frankly the contradictions and ambiguities that make such conflicts inevitable in any religious tradition, including Islam, and to resist the temptation to “essentialize” or oversimplify a phenomenon as multivalent and as conflicted as Islam.

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